

Recent Bhutanese Scholarship in History and Anthropology

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This paper would like to present the recent scholarship on Bhutan by the Bhutanese themselves and to show that the studies of these scholars are the offsprings of a long tradition of Bhutanese scholarship but that they also demonstrate new trends, which are in tune with the socio-cultural changes in the country.

My topic today is Bhutanese scholarship¹ in what are generally called "the Human Sciences", that is history and anthropology, but will not deal with sociology, political studies, development studies or religious studies, fields in themselves. In brief reference to this last discipline, suffice it to mention here *Khenpo* Phuntsho Tashi, assistant director of the National Museum, Karma Wangchuk, who works at the National Library in Thimphu, and Karma Phuntsho in Oxford and Dorji Wangchuk in Hamburg, both doing their Ph. Ds.

Largely bibliographical, this paper will also fully indicate the recent Bhutanese publications to interested researchers. The mentions of publications, which are often too unknown outside Bhutan because of problems of distribution, therefore aim at broadening the scientific knowledge of Bhutan on specific subjects.

While ethno-history and anthropology,² are still in their infancy in Bhutan - I will come back to that subject a little later - history has always been one of the subjects that has made Bhutanese scholars famous among academics working on the Himalayas and Tibet. Their contribution, not only to the history of Bhutan but to the history of the Himalayan region as well, is very important.

Among the many scholars of past centuries, there are a number we can name more particularly: the 4th *Je Khenpo*, Ngawang Lhungrub³ who wrote the monumental biography of the 4th *Desi*, Tenzin Rabgye; the

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13th *Je Khenpo*, Yonten Thaye, who wrote the biography of the 10th *Je Khenpo* Tenzin Chogyal and that of the 13th *Desi*, Sherab Wangchuk. This latter work provides an invaluable insight not only into *Desi* Sherab Wangchuk's achievements, but also the politico-economic context of Bhutan in the middle of the 18th century.

The 9th *Je Khenpo*, Shakya Rinchen, brought from Tibet what is still the only known original copy of the Collected Works of the great *Sakyapa* scholar Shakya Chogden (1428-1507). However, Shakya Rinchen was himself a prolific author, writing the biography of this Tibetan master as well those of several important Bhutanese figures of that period, including Mipham Wangpo who, as the 10th *Desi* and reincarnation of Tenzin Rabgye (Gyalse Tulku), was involved in the internal strife and negotiations with Tibet.

In the first half of the 18th century, the monk Ngawang produced two comprehensive texts on the history of Eastern Bhutan, the only ones that have come to light so far on this topic. The 10th *Je Khenpo*, Tenzin Chogyal, wrote the biographies of the 6th *Je Khenpo* and of the 1st Gantey Tulku, as well as "The History of Bhutan" ("*Lho choejung*"/*lho' chos 'byung*) in which he included the code of Laws.

It is impossible to mention here all the historical works, mostly biographies, that were produced in the 17th and 18th centuries by Bhutanese scholars. The 17th and 18th centuries, especially the 18th, were truly the Golden Age of Bhutanese historical literature. Conversely, the 19th century - perhaps because of problems such as political instability, though the 18th century had its share of strife as well - saw very few writings produced, but among them are the Collected Works of the 4th *Zhabdrung*, Jigme Norbu, and the biography of the 3rd *Zhabdrung*, Jigme Dragpa. These authors were all religious figures because they were the ones who possessed the command of classical Tibetan (*Chökey*). Their writings often stressed the achievements of persons who were religious figures as well, as it would not have been proper or even thinkable to write about laymen or non-religious subjects. They carried on a scholastic and literary tradition that found its roots in Tibet.

The first half of the 20th century does not seem to have produced any major historical works, but perhaps they have just not surfaced yet. The second half of the 20th century saw a real revival of the historical tradition, and Bhutanese, including laymen who started to emerge, continued the work of their illustrious predecessors. However, they did not concentrate so much on the biographical accounts and achievements of individuals but rather on the history of Bhutan in general, or of a lineage.

These scholars contributed greatly to the knowledge of a larger public about the history and culture of Bhutan at a time when more people were able to read the classical Tibetan (*Chökey*) and especially the national language *Dzongkha*, in which the first books to be published in the 1970s were folktales and history.

One thinks, for example, of *Dasho* Tenzin Dorje, who published several booklets on Prince Tsangma, the monastery of Rangjung in Eastern Bhutan, as well as on marriage customs of Eastern Bhutan. Also to be mentioned in this context is *Gelong* Nyerchen Grep, whose manuscript on the history of Bhutan written in the 1970s remains unpublished.

I would name the following as the most important contemporary historians: *Dasho Lama* Sangnga, who untangled the web of Pemalingpa's lineages in the *Nyoerab* (*smyos rabs*: 1983); *Lopen* Nado, who presented a cultural history of Bhutan in his "Druk Karpo" (*Brug dkar po*: 1986); *Lopen* Pemala⁴, whose *History of Bhutan* ("*Druk gyeirab*" / "*Brug royal rabs*: 1994) remains our best source on the Bhutan's recent history and the advent of the monarchy; and this list would not be complete without the 69th Je Khenpo, *Geshe* Draphu Gedun Rinchen, who died in 1997. Besides writing numerous religious treatises, he composed the "New History of Bhutan" (*Lhoi Choejung Sarpa/IHo'i chos 'byung gsar pa*: 1972), as well as the famous biography of the much beloved cultural hero, Drukpa Kunley (1455-1529).

These historians who wrote in *Dzongkha* or in *Chökey* are prestigious models for the present generation. Educated in English, the new historians now write in this language with a very different style, more inspired by Western methodology and modern narrative approaches. As they write about history, they provide the socio-economic and cultural background that was often lacking in the works of their predecessors.

Her Majesty *Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck's* recently published book, *Of Rainbows and Clouds*, tells the life story of her father, *Yab Ugyen Dorji*. This biography provides a fascinating account of Bhutanese society in the early and mid-20th century, along with a wealth of previously undisclosed information on famous religious figures.

Karma Ura, in *The Hero With a Thousand Eyes* - which he has referred to as oral history - gives us, through the life story of *Dasho Shingkarlam*, a detailed picture of life at the court of the Second King, as well as background on Bhutan's economy, administration and tax system at that time. It is, so far, the only information available on these subjects, which are crucial to any study of Bhutan in the 20th century.

C.T. Dorje has produced several books that are useful compilations of historical texts. As for Ugyen Pelgen from Sherubtse College, he published, with Tenzin Rigden, a historical and cultural survey of the *Zhemgang dzongkhag*. This study, *Khengrig Namsum: a Historical Profile of Zhemgang Dzongkhag* (1999), brings forth valuable information on the history of this little-known district. One could only wish such a survey be taken up for every district in Bhutan.

Mynak *Tulku* has written several articles on the history of religion, on the international relations at the time of the 13th *Desi* Sherab Wangchuk, and the history of the Bhutanese texts in the National Library.

Also at the National Library, which has a research project with the Royal Library of Denmark, Yonten Thaye is working on a translation

of the life of Phajo Drugom zhig po (1208-1275), the *Lama* who brought the *Drukpa* school to Bhutan, while Gyonpo Tshering has compiled, in *Dzongkha*, a book of songs subtitled in English *A Treasury of Bhutanese Songs* (1997). He is following in the footsteps of both *Dasho* Sherab Thaye, who compiled a series of *Dzongkha* proverbs and sayings in the 1980s, and Mani Dorje and Kunzang Tobgyel who published "280 Folk songs of Bhutan", also in *Dzongkha*, in 1985. The mammoth publication of a version of the famous Gesar Epic in thirty volumes by Kunzang Tobgyel in 1979-81 was also a landmark in the history of epic literature, both oral and written.

In 1999, Tsewang Nidup and Per K. Sørensen published, in a bilingual edition (*Dzongkha* and English), "Sayings and proverbs from Bhutan" ("Jigten pey pche tam" / 'Jig rten pai dpYE gtam, thus adding to the corpus of oral literature that has now been recorded in written form.

These publications have brought us to the related fields of ethnography, ethno-history and anthropology. Although several of the writers do not have formal academic training, the interest, awareness and pride in their own culture is such among Bhutanese that they are producing, often unknowingly, works that could be classified as ethnographic. A feature that is particularly interesting in the Bhutanese context is that the people who record the traditions are not mostly foreign researchers, as is often the case in other parts of the Himalayas, but Bhutanese themselves. Furthermore, they do not do it in an academic context or for comparative studies, but with the intention of passing the traditions on to the new generations and contribute to a better knowledge and understanding of their own culture by the Bhutanese. This is rendered possible by better standards, in both English and *Dzongkha*, and by education now reaching out to the large majority of the population.

The best recent examples are the two books on Bhutanese etiquette (*Driglam namzha*), both published in 1999. One, in *Dzongkha*, (*Driglam namzhag gi debther norbu threngwa*"/*sgrigs lam rnam gzhang gi deb ther nor bu'i 'phreng ba*) is the result of years of work by the

Royal Chamberlain, the *Gyalpo Zimpon*, Dorje Gyaltsen. The other, *Driglam Namzhag: a Manual in Dzongkha* and English, and with explanatory drawings, is a collective work of the National Library. These books, which are intended to teach modern Bhutanese the traditional and proper code of conduct in all circumstances of life, are in fact invaluable ethnographical testimonies on this aspect of Bhutanese culture, the recording of which had previously remained oral.

A collective work *An Introduction to Traditional Architecture of Bhutan* by the Department of Works, Housing and Roads (1993) was one of the first attempts by the Bhutanese to compile data on a specific topic and it provided a cultural as well as technical background on Bhutanese architecture.

With the same aim, to document a tradition, and on royal command, *Dasho* Nagphel, who at the time headed the Royal dance troupe, wrote in the early 1970s a guidebook on religious dances performed in Bhutan by laymen, and in 1982, the Department of Tourism published a small guidebook on the dances of the Paro *Tshechu*.

Tshering Gyeltshen has put in writing a collection of popular stories which have a ribald and humorous tone ("Jigten gepey trotam" *'Jig rten rgas pai spro gtam*: 2000), and the *Dzongkha* Development Commission, besides translating, from *Chökey* into *Dzongkha*, the life of the *Zhabdrung* Ngawang Namgyal and the life of Phajo Drugom zhig po, has produced a story-book on "monkey and bird" ("Ja prel tsoe tam" / *Bya 'prel rtsod gtam*: 2000) and a booklet on the official festivals of Bhutan ("Zhungprel Duchen ngelso namshey" / *gzhung 'brel dus chen ngal gsoi rnarn bshad*. 1999).

Karma Ura and Sonam Kinga have recorded and translated two *Lozes*, adding lengthy informative introductions to them. This oral genre is a ballad in which ordinary Bhutanese can express emotions and speak about social conflicts. *The Ballad of Pemi Tshewang Tashi* (1997), first recorded in written form by the Late *Lopen* Gyompo Tenzin in the 1960s, was translated and beautifully illustrated by Karma Ura. It

tells the story of a commander going to war and death out of loyalty to his lord, and expressing his sorrow and attachment to his village and family. In the same way, The ballad of *Gaylong Sumdar Tashi* translated by Sonam Kinga, tells the story of a man who has to leave his family and become a monk in order to fulfill the monk-tax requirement. Dating from the 19th and 18th centuries respectively, these poetic ballads, full of sorrow, reveal the conflict between attachment to families and sense of duty, as well as providing a glimpse of Bhutanese society and its ways of thinking, strongly embedded in Buddhist values.

Besides his books, Karma Ura has published several articles on contemporary social issues and is currently the director of the newly formed - by the Bhutanese government-, Centre for Bhutan Studies funded partly by Danida, which specializes in socio-political topics, although some of its young researchers, such as Sonam Kinga and Phuntsho Rabten, are also interested in popular beliefs, folk stories and aspects of material culture.

On the study of people of Bhutan, Jagar Dorji, working at the Education Department, has published the first research paper on a very small population living in south-western Bhutan, the *Lhopa* (also called *Doya*) of Samtse, but his heavy professional schedule does not, unfortunately, leave him much time to pursue his research interests.

A new phenomenon is the emergence of female writers and researchers in the field of ethnography and anthropology. It can only be regretted that Sonam Wangmo and Sonam Chhoki did not pursue their studies, which were the bases of their published articles on the *Brokpa* of Merak Sakteng for the former, and on the sacred and obscene for the latter, and that Sonam Chhoki's Ph.D dissertation at the SOAS was not published.

Kinley Wangmo has collected *Tales from Rural Bhutan* which she published in 1997, but she had previously published, in 1995, a longer *Dzongkha* version ("*Druk gi Loze dang Tamgyu natsho ge*" / '*Brug gi blo ze dang gtam rgyud sna tshogs dge*') in which three short versified ballads (Loze) appear. One is a witty exchange between a bald man

and a lady from Laya; the second is a highly metaphorical dialogue between a young lady and her suitor; the third expresses good wishes for a village. She is now working on the stories of *Ap Wang Drugye*.

Kunzang Choden is Bhutan's best-known female writer on various aspects of popular culture, and she takes great care to set folk stories in the local context. Her *Folk Tales of Bhutan* (1993) and *Tales of the Yeti* (1997) have contributed greatly to the knowledge of oral literature. She has also written several articles, especially on women's issues and local beliefs, which reflect her keen powers of observation and analysis.

Kunzang Choden has participated in several academic seminars, as have Tandin Dorje and Ugyen Pelgen, both history lecturers at Sherubtse College. Tandin Doje is for the time being the only Bhutanese who has formal training in anthropology, as he obtained his MA at the University of Provence in France. He and his colleague, Ugyen Pelgen, have attended three international conferences in the last year, including the prestigious International Association of Tibetan Studies Seminar in June 2000 (IATS). On each occasion they delivered papers - which are forthcoming in the proceedings of the seminars - on their areas of research, which are, respectively, local beliefs and rituals of Eastern Bhutan and the Shar (Wangduephodrang) region.

Through a small cooperation project financed by the French government, Tandin Dorje and Ugyen Pelgen each went for a month's training in France in 1999 and 2000, and for the past two years two researchers from the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) in Paris have gone to Sherubtse College for two weeks. They follow up on the Bhutanese researchers' work and give workshops to interested students and lecturers on research methodology in history and ethno-history through lectures and field trips. A workshop on the same topic was also given at the Institute of Language and Cultural Studies in Semtoka in 1998.

The purpose of this project is to create awareness of, and interest in, these scientific fields, to introduce international methods of research

and existing western academic literature on the Himalayan regions, as well as to encourage the students to take up studies in different aspects of Bhutanese culture.

The next generation is now coming up finishing their studies in Bhutan or abroad. There is therefore hope that more Bhutanese will take up this vocation, as Bhutanese anthropologists are much needed to research and write on their cultural heritage, oral traditions and material culture. Ethno-history and anthropology have become specialised fields of studies that can no longer be pursued on an ad hoc basis. Bhutanese scholars have to represent their country in international forums and they need to be conversant with research tools and methods to be able to take their place, academically, alongside other researchers from around the world. Although viewed by some and especially the Japanese anthropologists⁵ as "hegemonic" and a legacy of colonialism, English and French are the most important languages in anthropology and especially in Himalayan studies⁶. The fluency in the English language that Bhutanese researchers demonstrate gives them a tremendous advantage over many Asian scholars, and this should be matched by academic content, especially when one has to stand up to the renown of previous Bhutanese scholars.

Interested students should receive formal training through degree courses, which would include *Dzongkha*, *Chökey* and the knowledge of the western academic literature that is abundant on Tibet and the Himalayas. The resources of the National Library of Bhutan, which has an extensive collection of Tibetan and Bhutanese works and Western books on the Himalayas should not be overlooked. The soon to be completed catalogue will be of great help to researchers, and it is hoped that the catalogue will be available on-line in the near future so that it can be consulted by other institutions in the country as well as abroad.

The publication of a scientific journal such as the *Journal of Bhutan Studies* by the Centre for Bhutan Studies will give great impetus to research in Bhutan by providing a forum where researchers can make

their work known not only to Bhutan, but to the outside academic world as well.

The upgrading of the curriculum of ILCS in Semtokha and the establishment, in the years to come, by the Royal Government with the assistance of UNESCO, of a new Institute of Language and Culture is a formidable step in the conservation of Bhutanese culture. This institution of higher education with a comprehensive curriculum which would be a challenge and a dream come true as it would blend traditional learning and international modern methodology and information technology. It should be able to train a small number of Bhutanese researchers in the specialised fields of history, ethnography and anthropology, and could give Bhutan an important role in Himalayan Studies.

The conception of this soon to be established Institute demonstrates the awareness, on the part of the Bhutanese, of the need to preserve their culture and to pass it on to future generations, as they see globalization as a potential threat to their cultural identity. It also expresses their Desire to contribute to the world heritage by informing the outside world about their country's cultural wealth. This is a recent and positive trend that is emphasised by the establishment of the Folk Heritage Centre with funding from the Swiss Development Corporation, and the Textile Museum and the Centre for Bhutan Studies both with funding from Denmark. The Bhutanese government's keen interest in having scholars trained and participating in international conferences in subjects like anthropology, activities that were unheard of twenty years ago, is a huge step in the right direction of strengthening studies on Bhutan by the Bhutanese themselves.

One of the challenges now facing Bhutanese academics and that I have briefly mentioned earlier, will be to try to reconcile their studies with respect to religious beliefs embedded in their culture and with the critical, and often iconoclastic for traditional minds, approach of international style and norms of research.

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Table of Equivalences Transcription-Transliteration

The names and terms appear in the order they appear in the article.

Khenpo: mkhan po
Phuntsho Tashi: Phun tshogs bkra shis
Karma Wangchuk: Kar ma dbang phyug
Karma Phuntsho: Kar ma phun tshogs
Dorji Wangchuk: rDo rje dbang phyug
Je Khenpo: rJe mkhan po
Ngawang Lhungrub: Ngag dbang lhun sgrub
Desi: sDe srid
Tenzin Rabgye: bstan'dzin rab rgyas
Yonten Thaye: Yon tan mtha'yas
Tenzin Chhgyal: bstan 'dzin chos rgyal
Sherab Wangchuk: Shes rab dbang phyug
Shakya Rinchen: Shakya rin chen
Mipham Wangpo: Mi pham dbang po
Gyelse Tulku: rgyal sras sprul sku
Shakya Chogden: Shakya mchog ldan
Ngawang: Ngag dbang
Tenzin Choegyel: bstan 'dzin chos rgyal
Gantey Tulku: sgang steng sprul sku
Zhabdrung Jigme Norbu: Zhabs drung 'Jigs med nor bu
Zhabdrung Jigme Dragpa: Zhabs drung 'Jigs med grags pa
Chökey : chos skad
Dasho Tenzin Dorje: Drag shos bstan 'dzin rdo rje Tsangma: gtsang
ma
Rangjung: Rang bymg
Gelong Nyerchen grep: dGe slong gnyer chen gregs
Dasho Lama Sangnga: Drag shos Bla ma gsang sngags
Pemalingpa: Padma gling pa
Lopen Nado : slob dpon gnag mdog
Lopen Pemala: slob dpon Padma tshe dbang
Geshe Draphu Gedun Rinchen: dGe shes brag phug dGe 'bdun rin
chen
Drukpa Kunley: 'Brug pa Kun legs
Dzongkha: rdzong kha

Choke: Chos skad
Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck: Azhe rDo rje dbang mo dbang
phyug
Yab Ugyen Dorje: Yab 0 rgyan rdo rje
Karma Ura: Karma Ura
Dasho Shingkarlam: Drag shos Shing mkhar bla ma
C.T. Dorje: Chen mehog'phrin las (?) rDo rje
Mynak Tulku: Mi nyag sprul sku
Yonten Thaye: Yon tan mtha' yas
Phajo Drugom zhig po: Pha jo 'brug sgom zhig po Drukpa: 'Brug pa
Gyonpo Tshering: mgon po tshe ring
Dasho Sherab Thaye: Drag shos Shes rab mtha' yas
Mani Dorje: Mani rdo rje
Kunzang Tobgye: Kun bzang stobs rgyal
Tsewang Nidup: Tshe dbang dngos sgrub
Gyalpo Zimpon Dorje Gyaltzen: rgyalpo'i gzimdpon
rDorje rgyalmtshan
Dasho Nagphel : Drag shos Nag'phel
Paro Tshechu : sPa gro tshes bcu
Tshering Gyeltsen: Tshe ring rgyal mtshan
Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal: Zhabs drung Ngag dbang rnam rgyal
Sonam Kinga: bsod nams kun dga'
Loze: Blo ze / Blo bsal
Lopen Gyompo Tshering: slob dpon mgon po tshe ring
Phuntsho Rabten: Phun tshogs rab brtan
Jagar Dorji: rgya gar rdo rje
Brokpa: 'Brog pa
Merak Sakteng: Me rag Sag steng
Sonam Wangmo: bsod nams dbang mo
Sonam Chhoki: bsod nams chos skyid
Kinley Wangmo: Kun legs dbang mo
Kunzang Choden: Kun bzang chos sgron
Tandin Dorji: rTa mgrin rdo je
Ugyen Pelgen: Orgyan dpal rgyan
Tenzin Rigden: bstan'dzin rig Idan
Ugyen Choden: Orgyan chos sgron Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck:
Azhe Sangs rgyas chos sgron dbang phyug

End Notes

¹ In the body of the paper, the *Chökey* and *Dzongkha* titles are given in both transcription and transliteration. The names of the scholars are in transcription for easy reading but are listed with their transliteration equivalent at the end of the paper.

² The titles of Bhutanese works and the names of the scholars are given in the bibliography, which is at the end of the paper, in transliteration for research purposes. The dates of the scholars are also given in the bibliography.

³ The exact delimitation of these terms varies according to the user and the time. It has been an endless topic of debate. Anglo-saxons call anthropology cultural or social anthropology. Continental Europeans used to prefer the word ethnology but now anthropology is more used and both mean broadly the study of cultures. In European Himalayan studies, ethno-history is also frequently used as it takes into account, to a much greater extent, the rich literature and the need to know it before starting any work.

⁴ As ethnology/anthropology was born in the colonial era, it is for some scholars connected to this past and seen as a legacy of it. See for example, Akitoshi Shimizu, "Does anthropology exist in Japan?" in *Minpaku Anthropology Newsletter* n° 10, Osaka, June 2000, 5-8; and A. Shimizu & J. van Bremen (eds.), *Anthropology and Colonialism in Asia and Oceania*, Cuzon Press : Surrey, 1999. The place of sociology is debated but in Europe, it is considered a different field from anthropology and sociology students follow a different university course.

⁵ A table of equivalence transcription/transliteration for all names and terms is at the end of this paper. The terms appear in the order they appear in the article.

⁶ Both these historians were promoted to the rank of "Lam" (*bla ma*) but their writings are published under their title "Lopen" (*slob dpon*).

⁷ See Shimizu 2000:7: "The general reluctance, or rather negligence, of Western anthropologists to refer to anthropological works published in minor languages show that the claim of universal validity, and hence of universal authority, has not been examined even by Western anthropologists themselves." Although I agree with parts of Shimizu's argument, which is valid for the past, I feel that on one side it reflects the particular situation of

Japanese anthropologists who write in Japanese and therefore feel neglected. On the other side this general comment cannot be applied to all fields. Anthropologists working on the Himalayas and Tibet know the locally produced historical and anthropological studies and Tibetan, with all his dialectal forms, is one of the three official languages (with English and French) of the International Association of Tibetan Studies and of most conferences on Tibet and the Himalayas.